

THE MOST EMBARRASSING THING THAT EVER HAPPENED:
CONVERSATIONAL STORIES IN A THEORY OF ENACTMENT

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We all have tales of personal embarrassment unless we are particularly ungifted and shy of telling stories. Such narratives simply are devices we use as means of social bonding--that is, as ways in which we share the experiences of ourselves or others, thus opening up our behavior to the scrutiny of others. The interaction must be reciprocal or we regard it as an unfriendly act.

Let me begin with an illustration. When I was a kid, growing up in a small town outside of Philly [Philadelphia], I was used to double-dating with my friend "Jelly-beans." (He was a little fat, very klutzy, and a clown.) One New Year's Eve we decided, since there were no parties, that we would be very grown-up and go into Philly to Bellevue-Stratford for dinner and dancing to impress our girlfriends. Well, we got there and were having a good time, eating and dancing, and at one point he went to the men's room. He came back and my girlfriend whispered to me, "His fly's open." (Things like that were a big problem in those days.) I leaned over to him when he sat down and said to him, "Your barn door's open!" As unobtrusively as possible, he zipped up. Meanwhile the band had started up again, and I asked my girlfriend to dance. We had just gotten out to the floor when we heard this awful clatter and looked back and there was Jelly-beans with the tablecloth caught in his fly. We ran over to him, of course, and tried to help him get it out, but it was stuck. Well, we were all embarrassed, especially the girls, 'cause everybody, I mean everybody, was looking at us. Eventually we had to roll the damn thing up and walk over, across the dance floor, to the men's room. Of course, everyone clapped when we did this. We had to get a janitor up there with a pliers before we got it out, and even then I couldn't get Jelly-beans to go back into the dining room.

Now, if your minds are working anything like mine, you are either saying to yourself (or to your friend sitting next to you) that you've heard that one before, or you are thinking, "You think that's bad. Well you should hear what happened to me" We have, do we not, a lot of such stories in our conversational repertoire, stories that we tell in series when we get onto recounting experiences, personal, familiar, or just strange things that we've heard happening.

A number of such thematically related subgenres have occurred to me, ones which emerge on social occasions. One kind are stories about strange first encounters between oneself and one's special friend (spouse? lover? partner?)--stories which commonly relate to being really turned off by the person, or being turned away by some feature of the situation. Or there are the ones told by married couples (especially early in marriage) about the strange untoward events that happened during courtship or the wedding preparations. Or how about the stories about the time you were unable to control your big mouth? Or your bladder? Or your digestive system? Or stories about the when and where of losing your virginity, with its special emphasis on the factors that placed events beyond your control? Or the stories about where you were when Kennedy was shot, or, in my generation, when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

That such stories are as patterned and formulaic as any other oral narrative is clear from the laughing recognition that I witness whenever I discuss the matter. Why, then, has there been so little study of such narratives? There are two classes of scholars whom we might reasonably expect to have treated of these personal narratives: folklorists and sociolinguists. Folklorists only recently have exhibited any interest in them, and then from a taxonomic rather than an interactional and situational point of view (witness the esoteric discussion of memorat and fabulat). Sociolinguists--including symbolic

interactionists--and ethnographers of communication have been more concerned with role and status allocation in social interactions than with the central place stories have in the establishment and maintenance of relationships, as well as in image management and in negotiations of identity (see Rainwater 1970, 284, and my discussion of this range of personal materials in Abrahams, 1975). Folklorists have been concerned primarily with items that may be traced with regard to historical and geographical distribution, which are therefore to be analyzed with regard to the consistencies of both form and content features. In these stories, the familiarity with which they are greeted concerns as much a class of actions as it does the specifics of the story. But it is only through an examination of the ontological status of narratives that enter into both our everyday interactions and the more formal occasions when we gather to tell and hear stories that we will be able to recognize and explore our own notions of what a story is and how we come to understand, appreciate, and judge them. I want to consider here, then, our native notion of how we arrive at what the story means within the context in which it is told, and how important it is whether the story is true, reliable, or just told for fun. Specifically, I want to discuss the basic questions we ask of any story: Is it true? What is its point?

Let me go back to my exemplary story of the wandering tablecloth for a moment. I'll begin with a confession: it did not actually happen to me (you see I wouldn't think of telling my most embarrassing story to any but my best friends, and then only if they told me theirs). But it did happen to a couple of friends of mine exactly as recounted, or so it was reported to me. From the usual folkloristic point of view, this wouldn't make a difference in a discussion of how fixed the character of the "text" was. But from an interactional point of view, it is important to know whether cues are provided announcing whether the story is true or not, or whether the listener is supposed to continue to wonder. Further, this believability may enter into the decision whether the story can be changed from a first person to a third person frame. If it has sufficient integrity of construction (familiarity of situation, build-up, climax of action, discussion of consequences), it may survive such a translation without losing the interest engendered by our sharing in the social embarrassment. Indeed, the story is (to use a native of judgment) good enough that it probably is translatable to an even more distanced pronominal position; it told about something embarrassing which once happened to someone, which we happened to hear about. Or it might in other circumstances become attributed to someone great or famous.

Let me use another illustration, not my most embarrassing moment, but one I shared with (or, should I say, engineered at the expense of) Dick Dorson. We were at one of those grand international events of his devising, this time in Yugoslavia. The docent of the host institution, The University of Novi Sad, gave us a marvelous dinner at what was billed as Tito's hunting lodge. It was quite an occasion, beginning in mid-afternoon. We were each given a bottle of slivovitz and one of brandy as we entered, and each of the ten or twelve courses had a different wine, so we were soon well oiled. Inevitably the toasts began, and I, along with my fellow Americans not used to entering into such an oratorical tradition, was genuinely apprehensive of what to say when my turn came (as well I might have been, for one of our historian friends managed to flood us all out with his toast from "the good people of Kentucky to the good people of Czechoslovakia"). Fortunately, just before me the docent had had his turn and had sung a song rather than give a speech. Well, I am much more at ease with singing than with speaking in public. And furthermore, the year before I had conveniently written a song to my brother on the proper Philadelphian theme of brotherly love. So I explained the circumstances of its composition and sang the song.

It wasn't long after that I found the pain unbearable and retired to the men's room. Whom do I find myself next to at the latrine but the illustrious R. M. D., who, making the usual chit-chat common to such occasions, approvingly said, "Roger, I didn't know you were a man of such parts," to which I could only reply, "Some other place, Dick,

if you don't mind."

As in the earlier story, this one relies on a situational setting of a high intensity event, often one which dramatizes, albeit humorously, the problems of such transitions, and which centers on the inability to control our behaviors or our bodies as fully as decorum tells us we ought. Furthermore, these events ought to have a climax of some sort, and if that moment happens to involve a bon mot, so much the better. If it does in fact include such a witticism, it means that in special circumstances it can be employed in something like a joke session. In this story, however, the effectiveness turns, at least in part, on knowing who Dorson is, what my status in the profession is with relation to his, how much camaraderie and how much social inversion was involved, and so on. All of these are factors in obtaining license not only to tell stories, but to tell stories about oneself, for here we encounter some pretty strong, if not always explicit, rules concerning storytelling as a social activity.

In general, such features as status and age have a good deal to do with obtaining such license--or, to use another of our folk terms, the go-ahead. One rule more observed in the breach than otherwise, especially among folklorists, is "Dotage breeds anecdote" --that is, the older you get, the easier it is to get away with telling stories about yourself. However, lest the old heads around here see this as automatic license, remember: some can tell 'em and some can't.

Though I am obviously joking about this, I am also dead serious, for one way in which the go-ahead is obtained is to be a master tactician in the game of conversation--to know when to draw on a story, how much time, and, by extension, how much elaboration will be tolerated. Gauging such a factor means assessing what kind of interactional scene you are involved in, as well as what your speaking status is in that scene. In general, scenes which are, by common consent of the participants, defined as conversations live by certain flexibly interpreted rules, such as the I-talk-you-listen, you-talk-I-listen, one-speaker-at-a-time rule which obtains in most American talk situations. Another is the equal access rule with the accrued appropriate ways to break in on the conversation. Another is of apparent spontaneity, in which the participants in the conversation agree to disregard (or laugh away) anything which either seems rehearsed or is in an inappropriate code (as when we rhyme accidentally).

There is a wide range of scenes in which these rules of conversation apply but which, as they grow in intensity, involve a conventional rule relaxation. For instance, the more "just talking" gravitates toward a "Deep discussion," the greater the amount of time an individual is given to make a point, and the more self-conscious the right to keep the floor is maintained. Or again, the more a discussion turns into an argument, the more voice overlap is countenanced.

A feature of stories is that they may be employed in any of these speech situations, from the most casual to the most contrived. But I think that there will be general agreement that as long as the scene is defined as casual conversation, the more stories must fit into the ongoing discussion; when they begin to be told openly for their own sake, then the line between "just talking" and a performance is passed. Whereas in conversations the stories must seem to occur to the teller spontaneously and the telling must therefore not seem too prepared, in entertainment the more rehearsed and contrived the telling the better.

There is, of course, a larger gray area here--situations in which stories are told as part of a "line" which has obviously been rehearsed, but because of the framing of the situation demands that conversational rules apply, the rehearsed qualities of which must be masked out and ignored. For instance, those who are fulfilling service or professional roles in society, those who define their work by a role relationship--e.g., lawyer-client, doctor-patient, salesman-customer--commonly have a repertoire of stories

which they employ as part of establishing and maintaining the relationship. Both speaker and listener recognize that a "line" is being drawn on, whether it is called a pitch or a good bedside manner; but there is common agreement to ignore the rehearsed character of the line.

In storytelling, then, even in such service relationships, we attend to the story as a thing unto itself and judge it in terms of how well it is delivered, how appropriate it is to the situation (especially to the character of the audience) and thus how much of it is able to maintain our interest and elicit our participative energies. But once we recognize the distinctiveness of the story in its telling, apart from its interactional correlates, we are forced to acknowledge the double character of such devices--that they exist both within and outside of situation. That is, the idea of repertoire is not a folkloristic construct: it is a feature of our interactional lives that emerges when anyone says, "That reminds me of the one . . ." or "I have one on . . ." . This double character is, of course, not unique to stories. Proverbs, prayers, charms, and many other such devices get their meaning and vitality from situational employment but are separable from such immediate contexts. Moreover, their detachability is underscored by our ability to recognize these devices generically, to "stack" them if we care to--that is, to give a list of items out of context which illustrate the type.

Just by having to write out these two embarrassment stories for purposes of reading aloud, I have been forced in fact to make a number of changes toward a greater fixity of text. That is, I made them considerably more performancelike, specifically more in line with the expectations of the writer/reading-audience relationship. As I wrote I kept eliminating redundancies, adding adjectival and adverbial elaborations, and so on, thus giving the stories a finish I would never expect in purely oral contexts. I did this knowing that they would be examined, in some part, according to such criteria. But such stories can be told in a very wide range of interactional scene-types and situations. To be sure, any scene in which completed action stories are told--especially ones with punch lines--will be monitored toward performance by the participants, and the licensing system will bend in that direction.

Studying stories as texts, as jokes, memorat, fabulat, or whatever (as we folklorists are wont to do), may then do some violence to the materials, simply because such study once again only attends to the stable narrative features and will not cast light on the interactional system or the contextual factors that give rise to the telling of stories. As a result, we may be ignoring, among other things, how the accomplished storyteller comes into being. Further, we miss the possibility of studying just where the connections between the everyday and the special, the intense, the enactment, arise.

The existence of such an implicit system of manners with regard to storytelling points to the most important dimension of stories: they are essentially social in their employment--social in the sense of being used to enter into negotiations for status and role-relationships, and in the sense of drawing upon the social behavior of one-self and others. Most stories we bother to tell concern, in some dimension, the breaking of rules; our interest and amusement arises from our implicit sharing in the manners of our group and, it must be stressed, in the formulaically approved ways of breaking and repairing the expectation patterns. We enjoy these stories because they encourage us to share in the embarrassment, but from such a remove that we no longer flood out. Indeed, one of the major functions of telling such stories is to take a situation which, while it was happening, was out of control, and to impose on it a sense of order after the fact. The more embarrassing the event, the harder it is to talk about it; but the more you are able to retell the story, the more you feel able to put the event under control.

We might begin to render a native category system of personal stories based on a sliding scale of proximity to events, closeness of relationship (both between speaker and hearer, and speaker and spoken-about), and the kinds of role validations being carried out. The most immediate type of story, and one which therefore doesn't have to be told from beginning to end, might be called "news," "the latest," or "heard abouts"--those stories which range from simple, unusual happenings in the lives of the members of a friendship network or family, to those stories illustrative of character which are called "gossip" or "talking about" when women engage in the practice, and "telling about" when men do. Such ongoing stories, when completed, may turn into exemplary narratives; that is, when they have a sense of ending and the ending stands in a useful and congruent relation to the beginning, they may then be employed as good-example-of-that-that-happened-to-my-friend illustrative stories, hard luck or success stories, or just plain anecdotes. With such narratives there is a higher degree of completeness, but not as high perhaps as those which are told in the more competitive situations of, say, joketelling or the tradings of anecdotes about the great and the notorious. In these the stories are still involved at least with human types and situations which we would regard as real, if not realistic. This would not be so with genres like fables, myths, and fairy tales.

In my most recent work, I have been exploring our own implicit ethical-aesthetic theory of what I call, for want of a better term, enactment. That is, by looking at our everyday uses of the (admittedly overlapping) terms ritual, game, performance, festivity, play, fiction, story, and myth, I try to demonstrate not only that we operate on a theory, but that implicitly the theory reminds us of our perceived continuities between everyday expressivity and the larger, more intense events which mark our lives. This last point is probably most quickly recognizable in the range of uses for the terms myth or ritual; as folklorists, we are threatened by the everyday employment of such terms, but it is useful for us to recognize them. Although with both designations there is some overlap of popular attitudes pointing to the misleading character of what are called "just myths" or "just (empty) ritual," that the continuing use of the terms to refer to an inherited order and value system of expressive behavior tells us much about our enduring concerns for investing life with the possibility of meaningful peak experiences. "Just myths" and "empty rituals" refer these experiences to the vestiges of social expression which have somehow lost their ability to organize, coordinate, and focus our participative energies.

The marker "just"--as in "just myth," "just playing," or, more appropriate to this discussion, "just a story"--provides us as we grow with our first ways of discussing the differences between our direct modes of expressivity and our techniques by which, through framing or reframing, we represent, report, or replay such activity. In the framing or reframing, we are able to point up the significance of the activity. Thus, early in our linguistic experience we learn the difference between activity and reporting past activity, between doing something and talking about having done something (or something having been done). Once this discretion is made we must further learn to make the difference between true reportings and joking or fictional ones. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes:

Most children learn at a relatively early age that some of the things that we tell them are "really true" and others are "just stories" or more generally that sometimes we are saying things to them and at other times using language in a rather different spirit and with a different force. They learn to make this distinction quite in ignorance of, and independent of categories such as fact or fiction (Smith)

These categories are learned, Smith continues, on the basis of experiencing the differences, and recognizing the cues which place this frame of make-believe around them, this subjunctive "might be" or "if" qualification, or what I called above, this quality of just-ness (Cf. Turner; Bateson).

Unfortunately, this kind of marking feature has been explored more with regard

to play than to narrative fictions, so that we have not yet made fully explicit what our native theory of framing and license is with regard to verbal fictions. But let me offer some generalizations about all of those highly framed, stylized, and intensive events which I refer to as enactments. Each type of enactment--game-play, performance, festivity, and ritual--has different ways of establishing and maintaining its separateness from the everyday world--what Alfred Schutz and other sociological phenomenologists call the "world of paramount reality." Because these differences arise on the situational level, we have little problem in distinguishing them as they arise. By this I simply mean that some game playing not only calls for a different vocabulary of movement and a different set of fictions from, say, ritual, but they occur at different times and places. Because both involve the fictional change of worlds from the everyday flow of activities, and because both stylize and draw on preformulated rules and patterns of expectation, we find it easy to translate from one to another realm of the play world or to the ritual milieu. All of these activities, by involving set-aside times and places, by invoking experience of such events, and by drawing on highly redundant and predictable actions, potentiate the participation of all of those present who share in this experience and knowledge.

But equally important, we maintain boundaries between these various intensive activities and events. We need to distinguish between the ceremonial and the ludicrous, the real and the made up, serious behavior and fun making. To be sure, as Gregory Bateson has argued, with a play enactment we must ask whether what we are presented with is really play in order for the event to be successful (Bateson). As he explores it, for play to be effective we must each ask ourselves whether it is really play which is going on (thus, the importance of Jimmy Connor's or Ilie Nastase's bad manners on the tennis courts which remind us that the contest could explode into a "real" fight at any time).

Similarly, there are numerous means by which storytellers announce the kind of story they are about to tell, but the best will maintain the question as to how much of what they tell actually happened, how much might have happened, how much is introduced to make the story good, and so on. An artful conversationalist self-consciously manipulates the boundary markers between different narrative genres, making us ask constantly whether what we're hearing actually happened or is just a joke, or a lie, or whatever. The effect which a writer gets when he prefaces a story with the warning, "Any semblance between the characters in this book and anyone living or dead is purely coincidental," is not just a disclaimer to protect the author from legal recrimination. It also demands that the reader encounter the story wondering whether the author isn't just hiding behind the disclaimer. When we read it, don't we actually expect something very real to be described? The oral storyteller drops the same kind of hints, but hardly spells them out fully.

This is what generic distinctions are good for, is it not? When we know that we are hearing "the latest" or "the story about the time . . ." or "the one about," we are able to take a comfortable stance with regard to what is coming. But we also expect the storyteller both to fulfill the expectations and to break them down at the same time, and one of the best ways of breaking them down is to appear to be telling one type and to slip into another.

Thus, social confusion is not a condition only induced by embarrassment stories. Some kind of upset is reenacted every time stories are self-consciously told, and part of the embarrassment, confusion, or whatever, may always be at the expense of the audience. Let's face it--telling stories can be an unsettling experience.

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